Telephone interview with Dr. Morton Silver, Navy dentist during the Korean War (Chosin). Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 12 October 2000.

Where are you from?

From Brooklyn. I was drafted at age 18 for World War II. I spent about 10 months before I was released to go to dental school.

Where did you go to dental school?

I went to NYU School of dentistry, and was 22 when I finished. I had no money so I tried to get some lucrative jobs but nothing was available. I felt I was much too young to go into practice and had no business skills. So I joined the Navy at age 22 as a lieutenant j.g.

By the way, getting into the Navy wasn't that easy. I was underweight. When I went to sign up, I was carrying a pound of fishing weights in my pocket. They noted that I was kind of apprehensive and the doctor asked me why. I told him I was afraid because I wouldn't make the weight. He said not to worry and so I got in the Navy.

I joined the Navy because I never wanted to wear a khaki uniform. I wanted to wear a white shirt and nice blue uniform, and that's what I got. I have to say this here. I never had a day's training in the Navy, the Army, or the Marine Corps. It seems impossible, but it was so. I just fell through the cracks. To serve with the Marine Corps you have to receive field medical training; I never received that, and I was strictly on my own.

Where was your first assignment?

The San Diego Naval Training Center in 1948. I had joined the Navy partly because I owed the government some time. They had let me out of the Army to go to dental school. And the other reason I joined the Navy was because I had no money whatsoever to open a practice. I was also exceedingly young, 22 looking 16.

I was assigned to a dental clinic at San Diego. I took one look at these fellas working there and turned white. They were highly trained dentists with a lot of self confidence, and I was a new graduate with no self confidence at all. I didn't even think I could practice dentistry with what I knew. I had asked and they had given me 2 or 3 weeks of observing them work and that was sufficient to get me going.

Eventually, I got orders to go to the Fleet Marine Force. I reported to Guam where I stayed a year. This was in 1948. I loved it because they had a strong sense of camaraderie. We had a dental clinic and practiced dentistry there. It was a field outfit, the Fifth Battalion Landing Team of the 1st Marine Division. A typhoon destroyed the whole camp and blew us off the island so we came back to Camp Pendleton.

We were going to have a parade one day. Everybody shined up their uniforms. They even had swords. The parade was to take place on Sunday. On Saturday evening Korea was invaded. Immediately, we marched in that parade in battle gear--steel helmets, weapons. We had no intention of parading in battle gear, but Korea had just broke and the Marines wanted to make a show. It was quite a thing to see.

So it was an image thing.

Yes. It's image that promotes the Marine Corps. This is the greatest outfit I've ever seen. There's no question about it.

I was still in the dental clinic. We were all assigned to various regiments. One of the dentists who was supposed to go over had a wife and kids and he literally broke down and cried. He might have been in the second world war. It was kind of shameful to see this. A week later I got a call to come to the office. A Navy captain and all the brass were standing there. And the captain began to talk. In the middle of his talk, I stopped him. You don't do that, but I did. I said, "I'd like to volunteer for the Fifth Marines. That old man came from behind the desk, put his arms around me, and he said, "Silver. Thank you ever so much."

So, you were going to take the place of the guy who didn't want to go.

Yes. And I went to Korea as the regimental dentist for the Fifth Marines. I did the Inchon landing.

Tell me about that.

It was a huge armada. The thing that was most impressive was that the ships were all facing east, and in the morning they were all facing west. The tide is so huge--beyond belief--that every ship swung completely around. LSTs that made the initial landing were about a half mile away from the water, just high and dry. We knew when they were attacking. It was not a major operation. It was a cinch. I was on a civilian liner. We had the surgery open and we did surgery all night long. We just kept cutting and cutting and cutting like crazy.

This was on some kind of ocean liner?

Yes. It was anchored in Inchon Harbor and they were taking the wounded who needed surgery right aboard our ship. I think it was the *General Jackson*.

As a dentist, what was your role?

I was assisting in giving anesthesia. You have to realize that the men who were hit were maybe 18 to 20, in the best of health and the best of condition. We could do almost anything with them, as long as we got them before they went into shock. The only ones who didn't survive were the ones who were shot in the head. For instance, we had one man about 20 or so with tears in his gut. Shrapnel had entered his belly. I don't know whether you've ever seen shrapnel. It's torn metal and razor-sharp. If you hold it--and I did--it went straight through the rubber glove and I was bleeding. You couldn't even touch the damn stuff it was so sharp!

Anyway, we worked for about 4 hours and the surgeon said, "Enough. I can't do this." So he closed the man up, leaving a drain. He hadn't yet sewed up all the holes. There were so many holes he couldn't finish. He told us we'd finish the next day. You could do that with these patients. They were young and generally very healthy. He wasn't being neglectful in any way. And these surgeons were good.

The physicians who were brought out of the Navy were the top men. Let me back up one second. When the Korean crisis broke, Washington sent a doctor named [Eugene] Hering. Hering was the man who wrote the book. He came and lined us up and read us the act. He told us that every morning he would have a supply plane coming in from San Francisco. He said, "I want all your requests for materiel in my office the night before." And the next morning the plane came in unloading all our stuff. And this happened day after day. Hering knew everything. We knew nothing. With him in charge, we were in business. He made sure we had what we needed.

So here we are at Inchon. We just sat there while the men worked their way up toward Seoul. We stayed in an old factory. I replaced the 5th Regiment dentist; he was being rotated back. They sent me up to Seoul. I joined the 5th Marines at Kimpo Airport. I went into a place that could have been a Hollywood setting, dug into the side of a hill with a blanket over the door. It was really something to see. As soon as I walked in the first thing I heard was, "Hi Ho, Silver." These were the guys from Guam.

There was COL [Raymond] Murray on his bed. He said he was glad to see me and that was it. I went over to the medical set up which was run by a LCDR [Chester] Lessenden, who said, "It's all yours. I'm gone." I said, "What are you talking about?" He then told me that he was going to sleep and that if I ran into trouble, to call him. And then he said, "If you call me, I'll kill you."

When he said it was all yours, did he mean a clinic or what?

We were in what looked like a barn. We had a few chief petty officers, a few corpsmen, and the men. We were an aid station. Remember this. The Marine Corps has a peculiar situation. The Army supplied the division with major supplies. The division then supplied the regiment. The regiment then supplied the battalions, and then on down to the companies. We did not have enough trucks. We had an absolute minimum. So the front line are the companies. The battalion sits right with the companies--three battalions sit right there on the front line. And they moved the regiment smack in between all the battalions. So all supplies came up from division. And we didn't have trucks. We, therefore, were the front line. Maybe we were a few hundred yards behind but who knew. We were always smack up against the line. That's how they did it.

At the regimental aid station we had no ambulances. We had one truck in which we kept our medical supplies. We may have had three jeep ambulances. They had a structure where you could put a couple of litters. It didn't work but we didn't worry about it.

How was the aid station equipped as far as instruments were concerned?

Nothing. We didn't have to do anything. Number one was triage. Number two was an attempt to prevent shock, and number three was stop bleeding, prevent shock, plug up sucking chest wounds. Then send them to the rear. We did no surgery, nothing like that. We'd pick out shrapnel from the skin. I was given the job of dealing with those who had been shot from the neck up. The truth of the matter was they weren't dead, but they were just as good as dead. It was just horrendous to see this. You did the best you could. Finally, the most we were doing was just using bandages for the frostbite. We would put the Vaseline bandages on the ears and on their noses.

All this was after you got up to Chosin?

Yes. But in the beginning you stopped bleeding, prevent shock, tag them properly, and ship them out as fast as you could.

Where was the aid station where you met Dr. Lessenden?

At Kimpo Airport.

You say, as a dentist, you were given the casualties with wounds above the neck.

Well, I treated everybody.

What were you supposed to do with these people?

Nothing, nothing. Make them comfortable. There was one patient who was paralyzed. I jabbed him with a needle all over--nothing. And I didn't see any wound, nothing at all. His head was fine. I opened up his mouth and looked in. He got a shot right into his throat and right through his spinal column. You had to assess what each patient had. You cut off his uniform to see where he was bleeding. You cleaned the wound, if necessary. We had sulfa tablets or powder. We also had, for the first time, Aureomycin.

Any penicillin?

No. No penicillin yet. Remember, as it got colder, we had real problems. For instance, they had a surgical trailer up there and they were doing surgery. They didn't use inhalation gas for anesthesia. They used spinals. We also had carpules of, I think, lidocaine. They would burst. You'd get cans of it and they'd blow up because they froze.

But this was after Kimpo. This was up at Chosin.

Yes.

Did you ever practice dentistry there?

I did practice dentistry once. Once they brought in a South Korean officer in absolute pain. I had to remove the tooth. So I took out a needle and was going to inject him. By the way, he was sitting on a water can right in a field. We didn't have tents. This was on the way up to Chosin. Anyway, I gave him the injection and removed the tooth--an incisor--without any pain. There was another time when I acted as a dentist. The fellow had a severely broken down tooth that was already infected. I sent him back to where he could get some surgery. That night we were all sitting around and the colonel was going over the past day's performance and figuring out the strategy for the next day. We're going to attack that hill at 8 o'clock, and so forth. But before he got to the strategy, he went over what happened the day before, and finally he got to the casualties. They could tell by the nature of the casualties what kind of weapons we were up against. Mortar fire gives you more chest wounds. Rifle fire, perhaps, lower body wounds. They knew. So he went over the whole thing and then said, "Silver, I see you sent so and so back. Look. I'm not going to tell you your job. This man is a machine gunner, a trained veteran. Now, if he's no good, send him back. If he can still be kept on the line, you keep him there. It's your ass and my ass."

Talk about antibiotics. The colonel had an ear infection. Lessenden said to me, "Hey, Mort. You want to treat the colonel? I know what you have." I had, in little ointment tins, every tablet and capsule the Navy had. I had these antibiotics in a little plastic bag. I figured if I got hit, I could treat myself. So, I went over to COL Murray and sure enough, he had an ear infection. I gave him some antibiotics. We got along very well.

What kind of dental instruments did you have?

I had a bag slung over my shoulder with a scalpel, a scissors, and some forceps and very little else. I don't think I ever used it except on that Korean officer. I also carried morphine. The most important thing of all was that pair of scissors. I'm not joking. A scissors is most important. In fact, we didn't carry the scissors; we tied it around our waist so someone could never borrow it. Because once you lost it you'd never get it back. Once Murray caught me on

the chow line without my carbine and he demanded I carry a weapon. Every officer has to carry a weapon. So I got rid of the carbine and found a .45.

When you headed up north and it started getting cold, did it dawn on you that it would be a little tough practicing dentistry?

We did not practice dentistry. In fact, I would have felt bad to practice dentistry. It was too serious a thing to worry about dentistry. When it got cold there were so many factors. One day we started getting men in with fractured teeth. The men were so hungry, and there was no way of heating up food. They would eat a cracker, open up a tin and eat jelly. They also had Tootsie Rolls. There were a hell of a lot of Tootsie Rolls. When you put a frozen Tootsie Roll in your mouth it was like a rock. Yet the men wanted to get the taste and they were smashing their teeth on them. If you had a tooth with a filling, forget it. The tooth is gone. They just bit into it, ground into it, and they fractured their teeth. Then the order went out: No Tootsie Rolls.

Getting back to carpules. Carpules froze like crazy. They're glass with a rubber tip. As they would expand, the rubber tips would come out. One of the corpsmen I saw took a 2-inch swath of bandage, lay his carpules on the bandage--on the sticky side--and taped them to his belly. Any time he needed a carpule, he opened his shirt and pulled out a carpule.

What would you use these carpules for? Normally, you'd use them for dentistry.

We used them for local anesthesia, sometimes just before we'd administer a spinal.

Did you ever do serious surgery?

We never did an operation at all. Anything serious we'd send back and they'd either fly them to Japan or to the hospital ship in Pusan Harbor.

When you were on your way up north . . .

It was getting colder and colder. As you know, there was no love between MacArthur and the Marines; we couldn't stand him. For instance, one night, a jeep came in with its trailer. And in the trailer were two wounded Chinese and they were frozen into the trailer. We got them out and the colonel said to me, "Treat them." So we took out all the merthiolate. We bandaged them and they were smiling and laughing. And then we interrogated them. We knew already that we were up against Chinese. And with the Army to the east of us, and we, being in the mountains, the Chinese attacked. We were sitting like a sore thumb up in the mountains. The road was a simple road--one-way. You couldn't get two trucks on that damn road. And we were stuck there. This was MacArthur's great and brilliant idea.

While we were there some of the Army troops were streaming through us. They were in complete disarray. I'll never forget the colonel saying, "Where is your doctor? Where's your wounded?" And the answer was, "We couldn't do anything. We were under attack." And the colonel said, "Get them out of here. I don't want to talk to them." He wouldn't have anything to do with them because they literally abandoned their wounded.

What was the most complicated procedure you ever had to do up there?

The most complicated procedure I didn't do up there. I did it down below somewhere north of Kimpo. They were doing surgery in a schoolhouse and the surgeon said he needed someone to help him. So I went with him. He was amputating. The kid had caught a mortar shell that had torn off both his legs. The surgeon was sterile and I wasn't. So he pointed to the

destroyed tissue, the mangled tissue that had to be removed and he had me trim that tissue until we came to fresh tissue. Then he shoved me aside and he started working. But again, all I did was assist, and that's what I did all down the line.

On the retreat from the Chosin, there was a column of trucks. We were walking. We tried to get a medical officer ahead, in the middle and in the rear. And I was somewhere near the middle. And there was a kid lying by the side of the road. People were just walking by him because they couldn't stand to look. His whole head was a mass of blood--one huge mass of blood. I looked at him and walked on. I was walking with a corpsman. I must have walked a hundred and fifty feet when I realized I just couldn't leave him there. So I went back to him. The kid was frightened out of his wits. First of all, no one would go near him, and second of all he was so bloody--huge gouts of blood. I took huge packs of gauze and cotton and started wiping it away because it had congealed. And then I started laughing. He had a massive cut inside his mouth that was bleeding like crazy. The wound wasn't even worth a purple heart. He was young and healthy and because it was freezing cold, he wasn't bleeding to death. After I wiped out the blood, I jammed some gauze into his mouth and told him to hold on to it. Finally, he came out like a human being with a cut inside his mouth. Were we happy! I sent him on his way. It was beautiful, just beautiful.

Another time up there, I saw a kid walking along who looked like God had forsaken him. I walked over to him. Apparently, he had diarrhea and he was just filthy. By this time we had Army ambulances with lots of supplies. I just wiped him down. He looked as though he was wearing a diaper there was so much stuff. We put his pants back on again and he was so happy, off he went.

What about the incident with the truck?

This was where I got my Silver Star. We were working our way back from Hagaru. There were kids lying in a field and they had to be taken care of. Most of them were frozen with frostbite and couldn't walk. Then the rumor went around that we were pulling out. These kids were frightened out of their wits. They asked me, "Doctor, what's going to happen to us?" We issued weapons to those who could handle them. Then I went to the colonel and said, "Colonel, what are we going to do? The men are panic stricken and we have no way of getting them out." The colonel looked at me and said, "Silver, you go back and tell them that if we can't get them out we're not going out."

That night they warned us that the artillery was going to open up--155 mm, 75 mm cannon, everything. They aimed into the surrounding hills where the Chinese were. They fired every round we had. All night long. In the morning they blew up the guns, tore up the tires. Now we had about 40 large trucks that once held the ammo for that artillery, and we piled the wounded from that field in them like cordwood. There was no other way of describing it. Two chaplains assisted me. They were wonderful. My back was so bad I looked like the letter C. I was so bent over I couldn't stand up anymore.

For food, during the day, if the column stopped, we started a fire under a 55-gallon drum of water. We threw all the c-ration cans in there and when they were warm we tossed them into the truck. The men who were conscious and alive enough would open the cans and feed everybody.

The roads were highly crowned and covered with snow and packed almost like ice. And the column was moving very slowly. We were coming into Koto-ri. Chesty Puller's outfit had established a perimeter and we were passing through that perimeter. I was pretty much near the

end of the convoy and suddenly a truck filled with wounded went over the side. I saw there was a kid pinned underneath with the truck on top of him. Apparently, his steel helmet was holding the truck up. I didn't know what the hell to do. A corpsmen and I hauled the men out of the truck. There was primer cord in there and some kind of chlorine that was burning everybody. We took the men and dunked the men in a nearby stream to get the stuff off. Even in that cold, we found a stream with water running. The question was how we were going to get this damn truck off the kid. I stood in the way and stopped the column of trucks. And there weren't too many trucks left, maybe a handful. A sergeant found a winch on one of the trucks and we threw the cable over, hooked it onto the truck. The truck moved just enough to allow me to crawl underneath. I started pulling on the guy. The winch pulled the truck up a little more and I yanked him free. And then the column moved on.

Now I had wounded to deal with, and the man I had just rescued had fractured legs. I took some stakes and put them between his legs and wrapped them in a bundle. Fortunately, one of the chaplains came down the line. We were able to stop another truck. Remember, all the trucks are filled to capacity with wounded, but you could always shove somebody else in. We must have had eight or nine men from the truck that had gone over the side. We hauled them back onto the road and threw them onto the trucks. And that was the finish of the whole thing. I couldn't move any more. Then they strapped me to the front fender of one of the trucks and I rode into Koto-ri that way.

When you think of that horrible time, what stands out in your mind?

I was young. I wasn't married. I was immortal. Furthermore, I wanted to win a medal. Of course, I didn't know I would get the Silver Star.